A Chameleon Church

Dedicated to

New England Congregationalists

By A Free Lance

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OFTEN have I congratulated myself upon having been born a *Congregationalist.* For various reasons :

1. Because the Congregational Church is the oldest and the original church of New England. The Pilgrims, who landed on Plymouth Rock, in 1620, were *Congregationalists.* Their prayers and psalms first broke the silence of these hills and vales, that before had but echoed to the savage growl of wild beasts, or to the startling war-whoop of the more savage Indian.

2. Because of the character of the founders of the Congregational Church, am I glad that I was born under its influences. These men were not enthusiasts. They were thoughtful, clear-headed men. They were men of God. They had a reason for the hope that was in them. They were men of faith and prayer. The Church, which they here established, had its foundation in the great fundamental, enduring principles of God's word ; in these truths, that no false philosophy, or carping criticism can subvert.

3. These men were not only men of intelligence ; they were also educated men, men of culture. Many of them had been trained in the best schools of the old country. They were far-seeing men ; men of broad views. They felt the importance and value of intellectual culture, as well as of moral and religious training, for the stability and maintenance

of the well-being of any community. Hence, they, at once, beside the church, sought the establishment of the school and college. It is to their wisdom and foresight, as *Congregationalists,* that we owe the superiority of intelligence that marked the early history of every New England community; the influence of which has since been felt in every part of the widely-expanded nation. Especially was New England distinguished for its religious teaching and culture. Those who were called to the responsible service of the Gospel Ministry deeply felt the obligation laid upon them. They were not only preachers, but *teachers* of the Word. They felt that there was something to be *known* of God, and of his work, and they "reasoned out of the Scriptures," seeking to make their hearers intelligent recipients of the great truths most vital to their welfare. And it is probable that, never before, or since, have there been, anywhere, unless Scotland be an exception, congregations of Christian believers so intelligent upon religious subjects, as could, at one period, be found throughout the Churches of New England.

4. For the *simplicity* of its *forms of service,* in its orginal organization, have I been grateful to the Congregational Church. The pilgrim *Congregationalists,* migrating to this country, had broken away from the burdens and restrains of a church largely given over to a dead formalism. While there were honorable exceptions, the service of the Sanctuary was conducted, for the most part, by all grades of the clergy in a careless, perfunctory manner, utterly devoid of a serious spirituality. With this conditions of things these men of earnest convictions, had no sympathy. They believed that "God is a *Spirit,* and that they who worship Him, must worship Him in spirit and in truth." They sought liberty and freedom of conscience. But, while they separated themselves from "The Church," they were compelled to contribute to its mainte-

nance, and were persecuted for their non-conformity. They fled to these, then, inhospitable shores, for "freedom to worship God." And in the establishment of their religious worship, they sought, as far as possible to free it from all external forms; from every appearance of "*will worship;*" from whatever tended to a substitution of a shadow for the substance; an outward show for the sincere devotion of the heart.

5. By this emancipation from cumbrous forms has been developed, in the Congregational Church, another excellent quality worthy of grateful appreciation. It is its peculiar adaptation, for extending the work of Christian Evangelization in the world. An army for rapid advance into an enemy's country must move with light weight. All needless trappings must be thrown aside. The *Congregational Church*, by the simplicity of its organization, is especially fitted to be the *Light Infantry* division of the great host that is needed for the conquest of the world for Christ. The true Christian soldier needs but one weapon—"the sword of the Spirit," which is the *word of God*—to equip him for the campaign. With this "he may chase a thousand and put ten thousand to flight." May we not well rejoice that we are *Congregationalists?*

6. Another thing for which I am thankful, that I was born within the pale of the Congregational Church, is the *Catholicity of its Spirit.* I am no bigot, if I rightly understand the meaning of the word. The genuine Congregationalist, as I understand him, puts up no needless barrier to a free and friendly intercourse with recognized Christians of any other name. He leaves the door wide open for the entrance of all whose sympathies so incline them. But he does not feel called upon to accept and endorse what, to him, may seem unwise and absurd in the precepts and practices of others. He grants to others the same liberty that he claims for himself, believing that each to his own Master standeth, or falleth.

7. One thing more renders me grateful for my alliance with the Congregational Church. Its *liberality*, in the sense of its bestowment of beneficent gifts, for the promotion of Christian enterprises. Upon this point, while I write, I have not definite data at hand; but while I am well convinced that the Congregational Church by no means does what it might financially for the furtherance of the cause of the Gospel, yet, I think I do not err in saying that, in proportion to the estimated number of its members, they are not behind any other religious denomination in the amount of their contribution for the promotion and extension of Christian influences, in our own and many other lands.

In view of these various considerations, to which I have briefly adverted, may we not all, my friends congratulate ourselves that we bear the names of *Congregationalists?*

But, alas! my brethren, I greatly fear, that we are in imminent danger of losing our *identity!*

It seems to me, that the language of Paul, to one of the churches of Asia, is not inapplicable in these days, to the *Congregational* body — "O foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you, that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ, unto another gospel, which *is not* ANOTHER! But there are some that *trouble you*, who would PERVERT the *Gospel of Christ.*"

There are peculiar and strong temptations abroad. We need to be ever on our guard. There are insidious influences, that constantly seek to lure us from our anchorage. The inciting word is—"*Progress!*" Let us beware that our progress be not in a retrograde direction. Are we not in danger of this?

In what does the true and vital growth and progress of a Christian Church consist? Certainly not in the perversion of sound doctrine;

not in ignoring the very attributes, that distinguish the character of God; not in the introduction of another gospel, "which is not another." Not in preaching a "*humanitarian*" *Christ* as a mere model for us to imitate, in place of *a Christ crucified*, as the only atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. This is not a ground for the genuine advance of a Christian Church.

Nor will external forms and appliances, foreign innovations and observances, catering to the love of novelty and worldly show, tend to the true spiritual growth and prosperity of the Christian Church.

From these deluding and pernicious influences the Congregational Church in New England, was, by the grace of God, for many years, happily for the most part, kept free. It had *once its trial by fire.* Is it again exposing itself to the fearful ordeal? But I turn to the more palpable and evident external danger that now threatens it.

We are rapidly drifting away from the dignified simplicity that once characterized the church service of our Congregational order.

We have long been in the habit of recognizing *Christmas as a pleasant, social, household holiday.* Yet, for the most part, we have not been unmindful of the sharp distinction made by John Bunyan in reference to *Christmas.**

But, in recent years, in our earnest desire not to be outdone by "*the Church*" *par excellence*, we have been gradually sliding into a recognition of her ceremonial days, — until now we seem about to go over to an entire and unreserved acceptance of all her round of *religiosities;* if, indeed, we have not already made the surrender. With much sanctimoniousness we are yielding to the obligations of Ash

*John Bunyan, when in Bedford prison, received at Christmas time from a kind Churchwoman, the gift of a *Pie.* He gratefully acknowledged the gift, but assured the good woman that he recognized the difference between Christmas and *Pie.*

Wednesday and of Lent, of Palm Sunday, Good Friday and Easter, etc., etc. The *Congregationalist*, our recognized Church organ, in the year 1893, devoted one whole number to *Easter*. I think there was not a single page of the paper in which there was not a reference to it. More recently it records, with apparently much satisfaction, the inauguration of a *choral processional*, which was *exhibited* with great *eclat*, making it evident that there had been a capture all along the line. The order of movement was as follows :

A boy choir intoning a chant, then an Episcopal minister, a Presbyterian, a Baptist, a Methodist, and closing up the rear a good (?) Congregationalist. This processional came off in the presence of a crowded and doubtless highly delighted assembly. How imposing and impressive it must have been !

But shall we stop at this ? Why not put *tanks* into *our churches*, for the accommodation of those whose preference is for immersion as a form of baptism. For I noticed the other day, that a Congregational minister borrowed of a Baptist brother *a tank* in order to baptise a candidate for admission to his church. And shall we place in our vestibules a *consecrated vase of holy water ?* And how long before we shall send out on Sunday morning, a troupe of our girls and boys with drum and fife to beat up recruits, in imitation of the Salvation Army ?

Now, my good friends, *understand me.* I have no quarrel with Episcopals, Baptists, Methodists, Salvation Armies, Unitarians, Catholics, or Jews. They may believe and practice what they please, with the same libery that I claim for myself. But, *let us be,* in truth, spirit and practice, what we profess to be—*Congregationalists.* I solemnly believe that there is no church polity in existence so strictly in accordance with scriptural teaching, as that of our own order. Let us respect *ourselves.*

Let us show ourselves worthy of our ancestry—*the founders of our church.*

Let us, for the effectual advancement of our work, rely upon the pungent presentation of the unadulterated Word—the law and gospel—the precept, promise and penalty, sent home by the divine agency of the *Holy Spirit.*

Let us not leave the *King's Highway,* to follow the delusive and deceitful phantasmals of a bewildering *ignis fatuus.*

Let us not, by the borrowed attractions and adornments of other religious sects, though as numerous and varied as the colors of *Joseph's coat,* subject ourselves to the merited epithet of

"A Chameleon Church."